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DE RUEHGB #2995/01 3171510

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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5424

INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002995

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2019

TAGS: PGOV I2

SUBJECT: WILL SHI'A COALITIONS JOIN FORCES? BALANCING POLITICAL DIFFERENCES WITH SECTARIAN REALITY IN IRAQ

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2907

1B. BAGHDAD 2288

1C. BAGHDAD 2639

1D. BAGHDAD 2977

1E. BAGHDAD 2984

Classified By: COUNSELOR FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS YURI KIM FOR REASONS 1.4  
(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Local media is rife with speculation that the two leading Shi'a electoral coalitions, the Prime Minister's State of Law Alliance (SLA) and the ISCI/Sadrist-led Iraqi National Alliance (INA), will merge before coalition registration ends on November 13. Sources from both alliances have disputed these reports, telling emboffs that there are serious political disagreements between the sides, and that the INA refuses to accept SLA's power-sharing terms. While Iraq has made progress in moving beyond sectarian-based politics, the major Shi'a coalitions are very skittish about the rise of new Sunni-majority coalitions and the Shi'a public's perception that they might be working at cross-purposes to allow "Ba'athists" to regain power (ref A). Attempts at INA-SLA rapprochement may reflect PM Maliki's growing unease over his electoral prospects, as well as Iranian pressure.

If the two coalitions do join forces, it will likely be after the elections -- if a power-sharing deal can be reached -- so as to ensure the new government's formation is firmly in Shi'a hands. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

SLA WANTS INDEPENDENCE

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12. (C) Senior officials within the Prime Minister's Da'wa party have uniformly stressed the SLA's desire to remain independent from the ISCI and Sadrist-led INA. In a November 4 meeting with the DCM, the PM's Chief of Staff, Tariq Abdullah, refuted press reports claiming that the INA and SLA would merge prior to the January 2010 election, but acknowledged that the two Shi'a-dominated coalitions have agreed to join together after the election if other (i.e. Sunni and Kurd) political entities form "super-blocs," in order to maintain Shi'a majority control of government. Deputy Speaker of Parliament Khalid Attiya (Shi'a independent/SLA) observed to POL M/C on November 5 that the INA and SLA had too many substantive differences to allow them to join forces prior to the election. He noted, however, that the coalitions "with some exceptions," (implying the Sadrist Trend, part of the INA), would not try to undermine each other in the run-up to the elections.

13. (C) Da'wa spokesman and MP Haider al-Abadi told poloffs November 8 that the SLA had definitively decided against a pre-election merger with the INA, commenting that the SLA had more to lose by doing so than it had to gain. "Maliki positioned the SLA as the non-sectarian, nationalist coalition and will be unable to attract

non-Shi'a partners if he formally links up with INA," he noted (refs B and C). Abadi emphasized that the SLA's leadership is worried about being accused of creating a rift in the Shi'a community, which ISCI and other parties can exploit in the face of "all of these Ba'athists building new coalitions." (NOTE: PM Maliki and ISCI Chairman Ammar al-Hakim have publicly criticized the new Sunni-majority political coalitions in the media for reviving "Ba'athist ideology." The Iraqi media speculates, and our contacts confirm, that this is particularly directed toward the "Iraqi National Movement," led by former PM Ayyad Allawi (secular Shi'a) and Sunni hardliner MP Saleh al-Mutlaq. END NOTE.)

**¶4.** (C) Reacting to numerous media reports of an impending INA-SLA merger, Maliki declared to local press November QINA-SLA merger, Maliki declared to local press November 10 that such reports were "not true." The PM added, however, that all parties and alliances, including the INA, were welcome to come under the SLA umbrella before or after the elections. "We said if they want to form fronts now, they are welcome to, and if they want to form them after elections, they are also welcome to do so," he told journalists. Maliki has reportedly been strongly pushing the idea of forming an electoral "front" with the INA, as opposed to a merger, that would allow the two coalitions to run separate lists of candidates while still being linked together on voting ballots.

INA RELUCTANT TO CEDE LEADERSHIP AND SEATS TO MALIKI

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**¶5.** (C) INA insider Qassim Daoud (Solidarity MP) told a

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visiting U.S. academic and emboffs November 9 that no one can accurately predict until after the election whether the major Shi'a groups would put aside their differences and come together. He asserted that during INA-SLA discussions, Maliki insisted on retaining the premiership, and ISCI Chairman Ammar al-Hakim refused to concede. Daoud predicted that the INA will win the greatest number of votes in January and take the lead in forming the government. He added, however, that the INA continued to be plagued by two competing subgroups, one led by the Sadr Trend that opposes foreign involvement in Iraq, and one led by ISCI, which supports the U.S.-Iraq Security and Strategic Framework Agreements. Echoing previous reports, Raja al-Khalili, Advisor to VP Adel Abd al-Mahdi, commented to poloffs on November 10 that the INA refused SLA's demand for 50 percent of parliamentary seats during the most recent round of inter-coalition negotiations.

**¶6.** (C) While most parties within the INA have tried to maintain at least civil relations with Maliki and the SLA, the Sadr Trend and Fadhila have ramped up tension by pushing for interrogation of ministers, including Minister of Oil Shahristani, affiliated with the PM. In addition, on November 9, Muqtada al-Sadr publicly demanded the release of detainees and those sentenced to death for political crimes as a condition for the SLA to merge with the INA. Contacts indicate that the Sadrists in particular do not want to give Maliki's SLA the benefit of being part of a united Shi'a coalition, whether in the form of a combined electoral list or a looser united "front," without extracting something in return.

FEAR OF RESURGENT BA'ATHISM, AND IRANIAN PRESSURE, DRIVE MERGER TALKS

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**¶7.** (C) The leadership on both sides of the Shi'a political spectrum assert that they are consumed with countering what they interpret as a resurgent Ba'athist ideology in Iraq. Hakim warned Ambassador on November 1 of the

continuing danger of the Ba'ath Party, and its ability to use "secular, liberal, civic trends" as a cover to infiltrate Iraqi politics and regain power (ref D). Maliki's senior political advisor, Sadiq Rikabi, told a visiting congressional staff delegation on November 5 that while the Iraqi people are ready for nationalist, cross-sectarian politics, the Shi'a community might be frightened into voting in a "conservative sectarian direction" with the advent of new Sunni-majority political coalitions led by "unrepentant Ba'athists." (NOTE: Once again, this remark was likely directed primarily at the Iraqi National Movement.

END NOTE.)

¶18. (C) Deputy Speaker Attiya noted that this fear of Ba'athism extended beyond Iraq's borders, commenting to POL M/C in early November that one of the objectives of Iranian Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani's recent visit to Iraq (ref E) was to encourage integration of the Shi'a parties. "Iran might be worried about the possibility that a large, pro-Ba'athist coalition could develop," he speculated. SLA MP Izzat Shabander (formerly allied with Allawi) told poloffs on November 10 that the announcement of the Allawi-Mutlaq alliance sparked fears that Ba'athist influence would return to the Iraqi government, and claimed that this prompted the Iranians and Kurdish Alliance to again press the Shi'a coalitions to unite.

¶19. (C) COMMENT: Maliki's recent negotiations with the INA may also reflect in part a growing sense of unease over his Qmay also reflect in part a growing sense of unease over his electoral prospects. While the SLA will be a major force in the elections, Maliki has failed to attract the support of even one major Sunni leader. Still, it is unlikely that Maliki will reverse course and merge with the INA before the November 13 coalition registration deadline without softening his power-sharing demands. The INA, and especially the Sadrists, will similarly resist Maliki's request for a looser "front" as they see this as giving the PM the two things he wants -- the veneer of Shi'a unity and control of his own candidate list. The INA and SLA could very well join forces after the elections to ensure a dominant Shi'a role in the next government, but they will also likely explore power-sharing deals with non-Shi'a groups that leaves the other in the cold.

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